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Tackling Informational Text Pages 74-76

Unpark Those Questions

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Use students' own curiosity to get them to investigate informational text.

An enormous poster hangs on the door of Mr. Henderson's 3rd grade classroom. Titled the "Parking Lot," the poster is covered with multicolored sticky notes. Scribbled on the notes are questions, such as "Why do I burp?" and "Why do my bug bites itch so much?" When I ask about the poster, Mr. Henderson explains that when students have a question he can't answer or one that is off topic, he tells them to jot it down and put it in the parking lot. When he has time, he pulls questions from the parking lot and tries to answer them. He admits—a bit ashamedly—that the questions often sit for weeks unanswered. With a tone of resignation, he notes, "The parking lot has become the place my kids' questions go to die."

Out of the Parking Lot ...

When, during a mentoring visit to Mr. Henderson's classroom, I first perused the parking-lot questions, I noticed that nearly all of them could be answered with informational text. As evident by these questions, children are naturally curious about the world around them. Informational text appeals to that curiosity (Doiron, 1994).

Mr. Henderson and I decided to try using informational text to take these questions out of the parking lot. Mr. Henderson embraced the project, as he was well aware of the recent push toward informational text in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In addition, Mr. Henderson recognized the dearth of informational text in his basal reader (Moss, 2008; Moss & Newton, 2002).

We set forth to implement weekly 15-minute small-group sessions in which students would use informational text to address these questions. Our intent was to establish work time that was frequent and routine but that did not detract from Mr. Henderson's myriad instructional obligations. Our hope was to increase students' time with informational text (Duke, 2004) and to spark their interest in informational text by having them read for authentic purposes—in this case, to answer their own questions (Purcell-Gates, Duke, Hall, & Tower, 2002).

Before beginning the first session, Mr. Henderson and I selected a handful of easily answerable questions. To allay his worries that scrambling to find new texts for the project would become another time-consuming task in his already busy day, I showed Mr. Henderson that the resources were already available in his classroom. Research indicates that the amount of informational text available in classroom libraries has steadily increased, from Duke's (2000)

finding of informational text comprising 10 percent of classroom libraries to my own (Ness, 2010) finding of 32 percent (see also Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).

And Onto the Freeway

When students came in on the day of the first session, they saw some of their parking-lot questions recorded on sentence strips. I began by asking, "Does anyone remember putting this question in the parking lot?" As hands shot into the air, I complimented them for posing such thought-provoking questions and asked where they got the idea for the question. Students eagerly pointed to movies, books, and everyday experiences as sources of inspiration.

One student explained that his question ("What do alligators eat?") stemmed from an illustration in Mercer Mayer's *There's an Alligator Under My Bed* (Dial Press, 1987) that depicted a character luring an alligator with a peanut butter sandwich. Another student asked after watching the film *Finding Nemo* whether sharks can really smell blood. We chuckled as a student told us, "I thought you put our questions in the parking lot just so we'd forget about them!"

Next, Mr. Henderson and I tackled my own question: "Can hippopotamuses swim?" My question came from the picture book *The Circus Ship* by Chris Van Dusen (Candlewick, 2009), which showed a shipwrecked hippopotamus swimming to shore. Using a document camera, I showed students the table of contents of *Hippos: River Horse* by Natalie Lunis (Bearpoint, 2011) and explained how it could guide me to relevant pages (see Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003).

Relying on students' feedback, I turned to the chapters titled "Staying Cool" and "River Horses." Students were confident that the allusion to water in these chapter titles would address the possibility of swimming hippos. Our *eureka* moment came a few moments later when Mr. Henderson read aloud a statement explaining that although they spend the majority of their lives submerged in water, hippopotamuses cannot swim or float.

A student offered, "We should create a freeway poster—that's where the answers to our parking-lot questions can go!" Mr. Henderson fashioned construction paper into a new poster titled, "Freeway: Full Speed Ahead" and wrote "Hippos don't swim!" on a new sticky note. Another student suggested that we write a letter to the author of the picture book to point out his inaccuracy.

Mr. Henderson and I then distributed several parking-lot questions and placed students in their leveled guided reading groups. We matched the questions with text appropriate for each reading group. For example, a higher-level group used the text *Grossology* by Sylvia Branzei (Price Stern Sloan, 2002), which has a reading level of 4.8, to answer the question, "Why do I burp?" A group with English language learners relied on the lower-level, picture-filled book *Let's Look at Pigeons* by Janet Piehl (Lerner Classroom, 2009) to answer the question, "Why don't I see baby pigeons?" For groups needing additional support, Mr. Henderson and I used sticky notes to flag the pages that provided answers.

After a few short minutes, students could barely contain their excitement to share their findings. In subsequent weeks, the freeway poster filled up with students' findings: Sharks can smell blood up to three miles away, the brown spots on bananas come from the fruit's starches turning into sugar, bubbles are round because air pushes evenly in every direction, and baby pigeons live in the nest until they are nearly full grown.

Mr. Henderson and I brainstormed ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. Eventually, our higher-level reading group moved from using a single informational text to using a set of texts to address one question from multiple perspectives. To show students that a variety of informational texts may be necessary to answer their questions, we offered them texts that left their questions unanswered. We also sought out other resources—print and digital—that might provide answers. Over time, students become more proficient in purposefully navigating informational text, using such text features as illustrations, the table of contents, the index, subtitles and titles, and typography to quickly identify the most efficient way to answer questions (Maloch, 2008).

A Lot That Never Empties

After a few months of this project, we were surprised to see the parking lot become the hottest location in the classroom! We originally thought that the parking lot would empty of questions, but the sticky notes increased in number. As students began to see authentic purposes for their questions, they generated more of them.

Not only did students' questions increase in quantity, they also increased in quality. Initially, students posed literal and basic questions ("What do hippopotamuses eat?"), but later on, their questions became more analytical, evaluative, and interpretive ("Where did the story that elephants are afraid of mice come from?").

Students also started gravitating toward informational text during independent reading time. This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that as students are exposed to different text genres, they develop preferences for those genres (Kofmel, 2005).

Stay on the Freeway

In our ever-growing list of things to do, it's tempting to brush aside children's questions as irrelevant, off-task, or unanswerable. I challenge teachers, parents, and school leaders alike to tap into students' natural curiosity and wonderings and lead them to informational text to address these questions. You may be surprised by the things you learn and the thought-provoking questions that follow!

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